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MORITZ SAPHIR AND THE PATHETIC GAYETY OF VIENNA

Wilibald Alexis tells a curious story of complimenting a staid Vienna matron on the beauty of her daughters, and of being answered as follows:—

“I was much prettier than my daughters in my youth. I was the most beautiful girl in Vienna. But I would not grasp my good fortune when it offered itself to me. I could have married counts and princes, I could have worn gold and diamonds, I could have owned country estates; now it is too late. . . .”

No other modern race believes and lives the religion of *carpe diem* quite so faithfully as the gay Vienna *mestizo*. Amelia von Ende called attention years ago to the eternal Austrian effort to prevent anything from happening. This, with the refusal to believe that anything has ever happened or will happen,—the refusal to look the facts in the face,—was yesterday, is to-day, and will be to-morrow, the instinctive attitude of the tragically cheerful Austrian capital. Never in her history was this true in such ghastly measure as to-day. But perhaps Americans will understand Vienna better and think of her with a shade more kindness, if they look at her for a few moments as she was incarnated in the irrepressible Hungarian Jew, Moritz Saphir.

There is nothing strange in the citation of a Hungarian Jew as the type-Viennese. Before the establishment of the dual monarchy, in 1867, with a second capital at Buda, Hungarians, as well as Bohemians, were even more numerous among the ‘four hundred’ of Vienna,—fewer than three hundred, to be exact,—and Jews have always played a prominent part in the gay life of the Prater. Moritz Saphir was born at Lovas-Berény, in Hungary, in 1795, was educated in Jewish theology at Pressburg and Prague, and published his first volume of poems from Buda-Pest. But he came to Vienna in 1821 to work for Bäuerle’s *Theaterzeitung*, and from that date, although he lived some time in Munich, Berlin and Paris, he was the pattern and acme

of that "Wiener Gemütlichkeit" which wrings the heart because it is so innocent, so random, so helpless, so sure to end in dreary regret if not disaster, and withal so irresistibly charming.

Young Saphir would have made the most edifying of rabbis. His memory was phenomenal, and his skill in disputation no less so. A page from his fragmentary memoirs reveals not only the child, but the man:—

"My mother Charlotte, whose family name was Brüll, from Pressburg, was the living incarnation of love, of mildness, of charity, of hospitality and of patience. I remember her, since I lost her in my early youth, as one remembers an angel seen in a dream. She was weak and sickly, pale and suffering. She drank with the most beautiful humility, long-suffering and piety, the wormwood which was poured into her cup of life. . . .

"A proof that the memory of her is grounded in the deepest depths of my being, is the following incident, with its sequel in my later life:

"When I was nine or ten years old, there was a great 'Talmud Examination' before the authorized examiner, Rabbi Lebis, Doctor of Applied Ox-Goads and Master of Constant Castigation.

"My humility received from him at the beginning of each week, contrary to all principles of justice, without trial and conviction, an anticipatory flogging, and when my mother protested he explained: 'I beat him because I know he won't study an hour all week, and will know more than all the rest on Friday in spite of it.'

"On such a Friday . . . I went out of the great general Talmud Examination like a young pig with a medal at the fair, brown and shining. The noise of my victory over forty-eight or fifty other Talmudites had gone before me, and when I reached home my mother kissed me, hung a new blue neckcloth about my neck, and said: 'I am sure God will let thee live a hundred years!'

"In 1831 I lay ill with a fever in Munich. I was discouraged, apathetic, almost in a coma. His Majesty, King Ludwig, in his noble sympathy, sent me his personal physician, Dr. Wenzel, but, dull and hopeless as I was, I would have nothing to do with him.

"About the twentieth night of my illness . . . I heard the door open softly; my mother came in, just as she had stood before me on that memorable Friday: a light blue dress, a

parti-colored hood with three broad wings, covering every strand of hair on her head, in her hand a boy's blue neck-cloth. She bent over me, knotted the blue cloth about my neck, saying, as she had said before: 'I am sure God will let thee live a hundred years!' and vanished. . . .

"From that moment I was another man . . . and from that moment I began to mend. . . .

"After I had been out for several days, I chanced, in the English Garden, to meet His Majesty, King Ludwig. Condescending and kind as he always was, His Majesty was pleased to congratulate me on my recovery, and to add: 'But why would you not accept the services of my physician? Have you no confidence in my special doctor?'

"I bowed respectfully and answered: 'No, Your Majesty, I have no confidence in your Majesty's special physician, because he is in the habit of treating immortals!'"

Poor Saphir did not live a hundred years,—he died a melancholy death at Baden, near Vienna, in 1858,—but while he lived he was very much alive and the whole German-speaking world was agog with the realization of his presence. His spirited muse sometimes grew unruly, and this same King Ludwig of Bavaria once drove him out of his little kingdom in a fury for venturing to make merry over His Majesty's poetical efforts,—although the two became good friends again later. For the last twenty years and more of his life he published the caustic *Humorist* in Vienna, and kept half the continent of Europe on the *qui vive* of apprehension as to the point where the lightning of his wit would strike next. Heine, Liszt, Hegel, Meyerbeer, Hebbel and the greatest names of Europe were the names of friends and patrons who both loved and feared him.

No one but a Viennese and a contemporary could catch the full flavor of his matchless persiflage, as represented in his spoken monologues, verses, newspaper feuilletons in the form of whimsical essays, and short stories which were more or less autobiographical. He was capable of nothing sustained or symmetrical, but the torrent of his improvisation, enriched by his encyclopædic learning, sparkling with quips and puns, poured itself out from platform and printed page, for an audience which wriggled and purred with joy,—except the victims. There was something of

Jean Paul in him, and a good deal of Rabelais. Take this, from a discussion of the apple episode in the race's early history:—

“The first pair, my kind hearers and heareresses [*meine freundlichen Hörer und Hörerinnen*, a form of address which is so frequent with him that he is generally content to abbreviate it, *m. f. H. u. H.*], found it difficult to be virtuous because they came into the world fully equipped with all their teeth. Teeth and virtue are personal enemies. That is why mankind are virtuous only in infancy, when they have no teeth, and in old age, when their teeth are all gone. . . .”

Or again:—

“We hear people insisting that Europe is over-populated, and that we must encourage emigration to other parts of the globe. Foolishness! If Europe is over-populated, why are our concerts and our theatres empty? Just go past a tailor's shop—where are all the men to go into the empty clothes you see hanging up? Pass a hatter's—where are all the skulls to go inside the hats? Look into a watchmaker's window—where are the men to wear all the watches in their vest-pockets? And the doctors, they haven't enough sick men, and the hotel-keepers haven't enough well men, and the undertakers haven't enough dead men. Ask the newspapers—their subscribers are missing; ask the girls, their lovers are missing; ask the wives, even their husbands are missing most of the time. How can Europe be over-populated, then?”

True child of Vienna that he was, Saphir kept open house, gave the coat from his back if he saw a brother in need, and threw his generous income out of the window as fast as it came in at the door, so that he died in poverty. Vienna has always been the world's headquarters for charity balls and benefit entertainments. Half of Saphir's monologues were for charity. Thus, when part of the city suffered a disastrous flood, he prepared—or more strictly, improvised—an appropriate and highly successful lecture on Noah and the Ark. He was a creature of gay and kindly impulse, a cultured innocent. And being so, there is a touch of sadness in him always.

“I remember particularly a night of Carnival. I lived in a garret-room on the Fish-Market, my room was dimly

lighted with an oil-lamp; on a little stove lay the contents-to-be of my stomach for the next twenty-four hours, in the form of three or four potatoes. From the dance-hall over the way a jolly strain swam across to me, and I picked up my one wooden chair and waltzed happily about my room embracing it.

“What made me happy?

“It was youth. . . . Youth is the real Paradise, where blooms the Tree of Life, and only in this Paradise can we listen to the voice of God and hear what the birds say and what the flowers tell each other, what the trees lisp and the brooks prattle. When we grow old we are driven out of the garden, and all our longing and all our sadness and all our impotent wishing is only the homesickness of the exile!”

Alas, poor Saphir, poor Austria! It is not gay young poets, but hard-headed and hard-hearted old soldiers and scientists and merchants, who manage this modern world.

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